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ABSTRACT

Most people dread sitting down to write, but the job becomes easier when certain writing strategies are followed. Most bad writing results from a lack of planning, not a lack of writing skills. Before determining the main point of a piece of writing, the writer should determine the purpose and audience. First, determine what needs to be achieved by a piece of writing. Three questions should be answered about the purpose: (1) What should the reader think? (2) What should the reader feel? and (3) What should the reader do? Next, the proper audience must be identified. A major difference between a specific professional audience and the general public will greatly affect what is written. The next move is to organize the ideas to be communicated in descending order of importance, with the main point coming first. Since most professional people are quite busy, the message should be kept to a minimum and unnecessary fluff avoided. Various graphic design tricks, such as headings, bullets, numbers, and white spaces, can be used to emphasize important points and to make the message more memorable. Finally, writers should be ready to try using imaginative writing which makes the reader become more actively involved with the communication process. Sensory images, for example, help to achieve such an objective. Writing is hard work for everyone, but following such a plan will greatly reduce the unpleasant aspect of it. (A list of editing tips and examples of wordiness are attached.) (HB)

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Writing for Impact: Successful Approaches to Common Writing Situations

by

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EVERYONE, IT SEEMS, DREADS sitting down to write. Even professional writers. That's because good, clear writing, the kind that people read and respond to, is hard work.

But you can make the job easier and write better memos, letters, press releases, and articles if you follow the strategies outlined here.

PLAN EARLY

Most bad writing results from lack of planning, not from lack of writing skills. Too many writers believe planning begins with making a list of their main points. That list is important, but it's not the first thing you do.

Before you figure out what your main points are, you have to decide what your purpose is and who your audience is. Your purpose determines what you'll say, and your audience determines how you'll say it.

FIRST, DETERMINE WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE

Most of us assume we know what our purpose is when we sit down to write something. But surprisingly often, writers have only a vague idea of their purpose. A typical purpose, as stated by a writer, is this one: *To inform the public about our services.*

Is that all you want to do? Don't you want people to use your services? Here's another: *To make people aware of the problem.* Don't you want them to do something about the problem? If so, what do you want them to do? Write their Congressman? Send money?

Ask yourself three questions about your purpose: 1) What do I want my readers to think? 2) What do I want them to feel? 3) What do I want them to do? Take the time to think these questions through rather than just jumping to the first answer that comes to mind.

1) Let's say you're writing a letter to the editor asking voters to pass a new bond issue for capital improvement of your schools. The easy answer is that you want your readers to think the schools need money for repairs. But making that argument may lead to other questions. How did the schools get in such bad repair? Whose fault is it? Will the bond issue solve the problem or merely delay it? If your letter may raise questions like these, it will need to answer them, too.

2) What you write may stir emotions. In fact, if you want your readers to act, it will probably *have* to stir emotions. But be careful what emotions you arouse and be sure to steer them in the direction you want. Anger toward the condition of the schools might easily be used to get people to pass that bond issue. On the other hand, that anger might also be directed at the school board or might feed hostility toward taxes. Anticipate possible responses so you can guide your reader in the direction you want.

3) Finally, you have to be clear as to what action you want your readers to take when they finish reading your piece. Far too often, otherwise excellent essays end with a vague call to action, e.g., "We've got to do something to keep handguns out of our public schools." I agree, but what should I do? Problems are easy to recognize; the reader wants you to show a solution.

To get your reader to actually *do* something, request that action specifically, citing a deadline, if possible: "To help create a task force for school gun policy, come to the meeting Monday night at 7 p.m. at Park Lane Elementary."

Request only one simple action. Many-tiered requests ("Fill out this form, get three written estimates, and come to the meeting on

Most bad writing comes from poor planning, not lack of writing skills. Before you begin your list of main ideas, analyze what you want your writing to achieve, and what interests your audience.

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Monday") don't work. Multiple choice requests don't work either. Given a choice, most people do nothing.

IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

Most people don't think about who they're writing for. Yet every person is different. What works for one group of readers might not work for another.

Other professionals in your field will understand your jargon. But people outside your field won't. Likewise, when writing for your colleagues and peers, you will probably use a more casual tone than when writing to your superiors. When writing to your subordinates, you must avoid the extremes of being either too casual or too impersonal.

Ask yourself these questions:

• What issues are important to this audience? These are the issues you will emphasize.

• What type of writing do they prefer to read? Approximate that kind.

• What tone of writing will they expect from me? Don't write out of character – give them what they expect.

• What do they already know about this subject?

Think hard about this last one. You'll need to avoid using terms they're not familiar with and explain everything that they won't already know.

When you're writing a memo or letter, the audience is easy to analyze. The difficulty comes in figuring out where the "general public" stands. Who is the "general public?" What is important to them? What do they know about your subject? What tone should you take?

The general public is everybody, of course, and that's the problem. But it's also the solution.

When you find yourself writing for the general public – say, an article or essay for your local paper – you'll be able to focus better if you personalize them. Think of a neighbor or acquaintance you talk to but don't know very well – someone who's intelligent and knowledgeable, but not from your field. Then write your essay as if writing a letter to that person.

Put in all the information that person would ask you for if you tried to explain the subject in a conversation. Use the kind of language that person will understand. Use examples that person can relate to and understand.

Tips for writing memos

• Put a title on every memo.
• List names in alphabetical order (not order of importance).
• Address memos only to the person who must act.
• If more than one person must act, spell out completely what each person must do.
• End with a call to action – what you expect to happen next.
• If you're responding to a call for information, end the memo when you've given the reqested info.
• Don't use humor unless you are sure that no matter who reads the memo, they will get the joke.
• Consider sending a short note or making a phone call instead of sending a memo.

Tips for writing letters

• Check and re-check names and addresses.
• Consider beginning with a title that names the letter's subject, e.g., School beautification: phase two.
• Make sure your purpose is clear from the beginning.
• Get to the point, state it completely, and get out.
• Be specific about what the reader should do next, e.g., "Call me by noon Friday", not "Let's talk about this sometime soon."
• If the letter is a request, begin with the request.
• If the letter is a turn-down, make sure the refusal is clear.
• Short letters are okay.

Tips for press releases

• Provide a contact person's name and 24-hour phone number.
• Specify the date you'd like the story to appear, e.g., "For publlication after December 15".
• Write a one-sentence, catchy headline, e.g., "Junior League publishes cookbook for seniors."
• Triple-space the text.
• Pack your first paragraph with information, but keep it under four lines of text.
• Make sure you include all of the information – who, what, where, when, how, and why.
• Include prices and contact names and phone numbers in the release itself (if appropriate).

The tips given here are very basic, but they are the main keys to success and the biggest stumbling blocks for most business memos, letters, press releases, and articles.

Above all, keep your tone warm and personal, but not flippant. Avoid using humor, especially sarcasm. Never say anything you don't actually mean.

ORGANIZE YOUR IDEAS

Once you've defined your purpose and analyzed your audience, you're ready to begin listing your main points. As you organize your ideas, make sure all the points you list will be important to your audience.

• Put your main point first. Arguments are easiest to follow when they're presented as a thesis followed by your reasons for believing as you do. If you do it the other way – reasons first, then your thesis – the connection between your points is not clear until the end of the piece. Readers often quit reading as soon as they become confused – that is, when they don't see the connection between any two points.

• Most readers don't like surprises – at least not when reading memos, letters, and essays. One way to let the reader know what is coming up is to put a brief summary of your main points near the beginning of your piece.

This summary may be simply one sentence, as in the following letter: "I believe I deserve a raise because I have exceeded the standards set forth when I was hired, I have been personally responsible for seven new contracts in the last six months, and I have just married your daughter." Those three points will be expanded and explained throughout the rest of your letter.

In a longer article or report, you may want to give each point its own sentence. If you intend to make several points, don't be afraid to number them, then refer to each one by number. But don't leave any numbered items out, or your reader will inevitably ask, "Why didn't he say anything more about number 2 and 8?"

• Explain your points in descending order of importance to the reader. That is, put the most important reason first, followed by the second most important, etc. People tend to read only as far as they need to. If your first point is strong enough, your reader might do as you ask without even reading the rest of the letter, memo, or report.

For dramatic effect, some writers put their reasons in reverse order of importance, as I did in the letter-example. This approach can be effective, because it slowly gains the reader's confidence and finally hits him with the clincher at the end. The danger is that you can lose your reader if the first few reasons seem trivial or far off the main point.

KEEP IT SHORT AND DIRECT

Your reader is at least as busy as your are. He or she doesn't have the time to wade through unnecessary fluff. Cut the fat. Get to the point. Make your statements short, simple, and direct.

• Use short sentences. Most sentences over fourteen words can be cut.

• Use short words. The most-used words in English are the short ones. These are the ones your reader is most comfortable with. Using short words will also help you avoid jargon.

• Use short paragraphs. They are easier to read on the page. Forget what your college English teacher told you - one sentence paragraphs are okay.

• If you must use obscure or technical terms, explain them immediately. When you use an abbreviation or acronym, write out the entire name the first time you do so, e.g., National Association of Vocational Technical Education Communicators (NAVTEC). After that, you can use just the acronym, NAVTEC.

• Remember that facts do not speak for themselves. You must explain them. Is the glass half-empty or half-full? Your table, graph, or illustration may do a great job of showing the drop-out rates for the last three years in your district, but you still have to tell the reader that the rate is dropping. Your table or graph might be misread.

USE GRAPHIC DESIGN TRICKS

You don't need a word processor or a page-layout program to begin taking advantage of graphic design tricks to make your letters, memos, and reports easier to read. The most effective tricks – headings, bullets, numbers, and white space – can be managed with a plain old typewriter. You can even get fancy and add graphs and other illustrations using scissors, glue, and a photocopier.

USE HEADINGS. When your article goes beyond one full page, break up the text by using subheads for each section. These make the text look less imposing and organize your points.

Subheads should be in type that will stand out – boldfaced type, all caps, underlines, etc. Your goal is to make the organization of the text obvious to the reader at a glance, so experiment to learn what stands out on the page.

To help set them off from the text, the subheads for this article are not only in bold type but are surrounded by white space. I introduced the subsection above with a run-in subhead in all caps. Underlined and italicized subheads can be used, but they don't work very well as run-in heads; they need extra white space to stand out.

To be effective, subheads must be descriptive. They should summarize the main point of that section. "Our conclusion and recommendation" may seem like a good subhead, but "It's time to buy another warehouse" moves the reader into the subject more forcefully.

• USE BULLETS to show lists of similar objects. If you're plunking along with that old manual typewriter instead of this fancy word processor, use asterisks or other characters to make bullets.

* These marks don't look as fancy as laser-printed dots, but they show the organization of the piece of writing you're doing, and that's the point.

USE NUMBERS. They're one of the best ways to itemize your points.

1) They clearly delineate each section.

2) They show progress, so the reader

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WORDINESS

Perhaps the most common problem in writing is wordiness. Readers are busy people. They want you to get to the point and get out. Learn to recognize some of the causes of wordiness and you can make what you write more direct and forceful.

Use everyday speech: short words, simple phrases. That's what communicates best.

Instead of this . . .	Write this . . .
It is generally desirable to communicate your thoughts in a forthright manner. Toning your point down and tiptoeing around your subject may, in many circumstances, tempt the reader to tune out and allow his mind to wander.	Don't mumble.

Use active voice. Not only is it less wordy, it's more direct and less likely to cause misunderstanding.

Instead of this . . .	Write this . . .
It is recommended	We recommend
He should be told	Please tell him
The complainant should be paid	You should pay the complainant

Avoid redundance and unnecessary modifiers.

Instead of this . . .	Write this . . .
Study in depth	Study
Consensus of opinion	Consensus
In the majority of instances	Usually
For the purpose of	To
At this point in time	Now
With regard to	About
Despite the fact that	Although
On a local basis	Locally
In the area of curriculum	In curriculum
Until such time as	Until
The overall plan	The plan

Don't state the obvious. Cut out unnecessary recaps and get to the point.

Instead of this . . .	Write this . . .
I am writing in response to your letter of June 24 in which you request a photo of	Here is the photo you requested.

Most of these examples were taken from Writing that works, Roman and Raphaelson, 1981, Harper & Row.

doesn't skip a step.

3) But never use roman numerals. We're not used to seeing them, so they jar us, especially when the numbers get as big as XXXVIII.

USE WHITE SPACE.

One of the most overlooked but effective graphic elements is white space. For some reason, people like to cram as much as possible onto a page. White space defines columns and makes elements stand out from the rest of the dull, gray text. Advertisers understand the emphasis that white space provides, that's why you can find full page ads in major newspapers with just a sentence or two in the center of the page. It works.

USE IMAGINATIVE WRITING

Writing is a special form of communication which requires the receiver to work. While you are reading this sentence, my thoughts are, in a very real sense, inside your head. You're not just hearing them. You're not just looking at them. You're thinking. You're actively engaged in reading the symbols on the page and interpreting what they mean.

The best writing makes use of the reader's active involvement. It uses sensory images so you hear, see, feel, smell, and taste *in your imagination*. It draws pictures, describes scenes, shows people doing things. One level of writing might say, "Jim tried to write his report, but couldn't think of anything to say." A more evocative level might say, "Jim took the phone off the hook, started a pot of coffee, put a brand new sheet of bond in the typewriter, and sat staring at the blank page and munching stale popcorn until the cleaning person knocked on the door."

You don't always need so much sensory detail. But sensory detail is more interesting than the vague "couldn't think of anything" and tells us more about Jim's writing problem.

- Whenever possible, use comparisons to make abstract ideas concrete. The "soft" surface might be "like jello," "like fur," or "like sponge." A "loud" noise might be anything. Get specific: It sounded like a door slamming.
- Translate numbers into illustrations. Did 25 students die in car wrecks last year? That number would fill a classroom. Or a football team.
- Use anecdotes to emphasize or illustrate a point. People love to hear stories about other people. Was the drop-out prevention program well-received? Then tell the story about the girl whose mother wanted her to stay home and baby-sit, but she snuck out of her house early to go to school.
- Don't be afraid to reveal yourself. You have feelings. You have experiences. It's okay to talk about them. Personal experiences are more convincing than a calculated barrage of words, statistics, and cold logic.
- Finally, it's okay to have fun. Your readers won't mind knowing that you enjoy what you're doing as long as you let them in on the fun. Sarcasm and satire don't work. But good old-fashioned fun does. A well-placed cartoon, joke, or humorous anecdote provides a welcome break in the middle of a hard day of work. Used properly, humor can make your reader more receptive.

Writing is always hard work – even for those who do it every day – but it's easier to endure when you're having some fun doing it.

Editing Tips

Once you've finished writing your piece, you'll want to edit it and possibly rewrite some sections before you send it out.

- Put the manuscript aside for a while so you can view it fresh. If possible, let 24 hours pass before you look at it again.
- The first few paragraphs are the most critical, so you should be most critical of them.
- Make sure your purpose is clear from the beginning.
- Give all the necessary supporting details: *who, what, where, when, why,* and *how.*
- Make your organization easy to follow.
- Look real hard at sections you wrote while bored or tired.
- Use short words instead of long ones, e.g., "use" not "utilize."
- Cut out all jargon and educationese.
- Make sure you have a personal tone.
- Look for strong verbs.
- Change all passive voice sentences to active voice.
- Vary the length of sentences.
- Vary the beginnings of your sentences.
- Check grammar, spelling, and all numbers.
- Check all addresses and phone numbers.
- Get rid of any redundancies.
- Use transitions to show movement through the piece.
- Put yourself in the reader's place and reread the manuscript to be sure nothing can be misinterpreted.
- Most important of all, proofread, proofread, proofread.

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